BRITISH COLUMBIA

Speech from the Throne

MARCH 14, 2001

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The Honourable Garde B. Gardom
Lieutenant Governor
at the Opening of the
Fifth Session, Thirty-Sixth Parliament
of the
Province of British Columbia
March 14, 2001

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members of the Legislature

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the opening of the Fifth Session of the Thirty-Sixth Parliament of British Columbia.

British Columbians enjoy an incomparable quality of life that is for us a source of satisfaction and pride and a key to our economic success in the 21st century.

We note with sadness the passing of many who have shared our pride in this beautiful province and who have helped to create, nourish and expand the possibilities we all cherish in this magnificent land:

The Right Honourable Pierre Elliott Trudeau, a writer, constitutional lawyer, and politician whose vision of a just society, love for our great land and commitment to reconciling divided communities guided Canada through some of the most dynamic and turbulent years of a still young country. Even in his death, Mr. Trudeau caused us all to reflect on the values of compassion, equality, and community that are at the heart of our nation.

E. Davie Fulton, MP for Kamloops for almost 25 years, a senior federal cabinet minister and grandson of Premier A. E. B. Davie.

Robert Sommers, former MLA and Minister of Forests.

Cecil Merritt, MP for Vancouver-Burrard, a Vancouver lawyer and recipient of the Victoria Cross during the Second World War.

We have also lost other community leaders: Len Traboulay, who served the people of Port Coquitlam for 28 years including 19 years as mayor; Commander Alfred Wurtele, a distinguished naval officer and former Esquimalt councillor and reeve; Geoffrey Vantreight, Saanich councillor, sportsman, gardener and instigator of the Canadian Cancer Society daffodil campaign; Laurence Ryan, labour advocate and Victoria councillor; Carole Corcoran, who served British Columbia on the BC Treaty Commission and the Commission on Canada's Future; Stanley Little, founding president of the Canadian Union of Public Employees; Ken Michael, former president of the B.C. Ferry and Marine Workers' Union; and Dr. Andrew Thompson, pioneer in the field of environmental and resource law.

We marked the passing of British Columbians in public service and academia: Mel Smith, a Queen's Counsel and constitutional advisor to BC premiers from 1967 to 1987; Geoffery Weller, founding president of the University of Northern

British Columbia; and Michael Smith, University of British Columbia researcher and 1993 Nobel Prize winner whose legacy my government was proud to remember this week with the creation of a new medical research foundation.

And as all members of the assembly, of the press gallery and the staff in these precincts know, the affairs of this house will remain the keen interest of our colleague and friend Andrew Lynch, whose spirit will not soon leave these halls.

The past year has also seen achievements by British Columbians in athletics, the arts and sciences.

In the sports arena, our Olympic and Paralympic athletes achieved great things. Walter Wu, Daniel Igali and Simon Whitfield each achieved the highest honour in their sport and won gold medals.

BC's Olympic team brought home two of this country's three gold medals, and an additional bronze in rowing. Our Paralympians brought home 22 of Canada's 96 medals.

BC's curling teams also achieved the distinction of winning three world championships. Kelly Law, Greg McAulay and Brad Kuhn each led their rinks to victory.

In the field of arts and culture, Nelly Furtado of Victoria won four Juno awards earlier this month, and Eden Robinson's debut novel, Monkey Beach was nominated for the 2000 Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction and shortlisted for the Giller Prize.

Also, UBC Professor Emeritis Dr. Timothy Parsons became the first Canadian to win the prestigious Japan Prize, that country's highest award for science, technology and achievements which serve the cause of peace and prosperity.

My government is determined to protect British Columbia's unique quality of life.

That means getting the province's financial house in order — balancing the books and keeping them balanced.

It means taking strong action to preserve our environment, getting our public health care system back on track and expanding educational opportunities for all our sons and daughters.

It means promoting a progressive social agenda so that working families . . . seniors . . . and young people . . . can look forward to a better tomorrow.

These are the basics. These are the things which give British Columbia a quality of life that is

second to none. They support our growing economy and they will define our competitive advantage for years to come.

Getting BC's Financial House In Order

It has been one year since British Columbia's 33rd Premier was sworn in to office and committed to putting BC's financial house in order.

Since then, my government passed landmark budget legislation, balanced the books last year and is on track to balance the budget again this year.

Two laws passed by this Assembly last session — the *Balanced Budget Act* and the *Budget Transparency and Accountability Act* — have fundamentally changed the way my government manages the province's finances.

These strong new laws have opened the budget books. They have made government more accountable to taxpayers, now and into the future.

Since the beginning of the last session, BC's independent Auditor General confirmed a balanced set of books for the 1999 fiscal year.

The Ministry of Finance's report on the third quarter of 2000 will be updated when the 2001

budget is presented tomorrow. My government expects a significant surplus, much of which will be used to pay down BC's debt.

These positive financial developments are the result of a balanced and cautious approach which first eliminated the deficit, paid down debt and provided new funds where they are most needed — in health care, education and other family priorities.

These are the results of my government's prudent management.

My government's fiscal plan is based on a strengthening economy that will continue to grow and on an understanding that this year's spectacular increase in revenues is not likely to be repeated.

Against that background, BC must get its priorities right.

Choices For Today's Families

Now that my government is achieving and projecting balanced budgets, what choices should be made to meet the needs of today's families and further strengthen BC's economy?

What comes first? Public health care and education or dramatic tax cuts?

My government understands, as do British Columbians, that we must make choices, because we can't have more public health care, better education and balanced budgets and also have dramatic tax cuts.

My government believes the public services families rely on must come first — not tax cuts.

What will be the key to BC's economic success in the 21st century?

Will it be dramatic tax cuts, reduced public services and lowered environmental standards? Or will it be stronger health care and education, the highest environmental standards and balanced budgets?

My government believes BC's families will lose if we try to compete on the basis of lower taxes, lower environmental standards, lower costs and lower wages. Where we can compete — and win — is on our quality of life.

A recent private-sector survey rated the quality of life in Vancouver and Zurich at the top of more than 200 international cities.

We finished on top because of our beautiful natural environment and our high quality health care, education, social policy and public amenities. These

are winning conditions in the global economy that attracts investors and investment to BC.

A narrow focus on tax cuts is the wrong priority at this time.

My government believes that health care, education, balanced budgets, the environment and basic social justice must now come before tax cuts. What's good for BC's families is good for BC's economy.

Delivering Real Health Care Solutions

Our public health care is the most important service we offer to BC families. But after years of federal cuts, it's not what it used to be. It is under stress right across Canada.

My government is committed to finding practical solutions and getting results. We are making good progress.

Last spring, the Premier went to work with Ottawa and the other Premiers to restore federal funding for provincial health care services.

My government invested the new federal and BC funds in hospitals and new hospital equipment right across the province.

The BC Health Action Plan announced in December will be fully funded in the coming year. It will result in the hiring and training of more nurses, the purchase of new equipment, and more community and long-term care in every region of British Columbia.

My government is making good progress, but there is much more to be done.

Our top priority right now is to solve the nursing shortage by attracting and retaining more nurses in BC.

My government is creating more training spaces and will keep the pay and benefits of BC nurses competitive with the rest of Canada.

My government will utilize the Provincial Nominee Program so that qualified foreign-trained nurses can help fill nursing vacancies in BC.

My government will continue to provide financial assistance to trained registered nurses, registered psychiatric nurses and licensed practical nurses who are upgrading or who require further education to work in BC's health care system.

My government will provide more resources to health authorities. This will allow them to expand

primary and tertiary care. Health authorities will be able to hire more nurses as well as more care aides and other health providers to take the strain off nurses and doctors and provide the best possible care to British Columbians.

In the coming year, my government will enhance home care services, improving access to a range of home and community support options.

We will renew continuing care, in partnership with the not-for-profit sector, to create 2,000 new residential care beds in the next five years.

We will open new community health clinics in communities across BC from Greater Vancouver to the Bulkley Valley, from the Cariboo to the Kootenays.

My government's innovative new health guide brings valuable health information and advice into people's homes. In the next few weeks, a supporting web site and a 24-hour nurse hotline will be opened. The guide and these new services will give British Columbians immediate access to the most extensive and authoritative health knowledge base in the country. This will assist families in getting the care they need, and also help reduce pressure on emergency wards and primary health care.

My government will increase funding for the seven-year mental health plan. This will provide for new community mental health clinicians, new support staff, and new capacity for intensive treatment.

Just yesterday, my government honoured the memory of Nobel laureate Dr. Michael Smith by creating a $110-million health research foundation in his name. The foundation will draw on the expertise of the province's teaching hospitals, universities, community health organizations and biotech companies. It will help develop and recruit health researchers and encourage physicians with a research interest to stay in BC, helping to provide more effective health care.

My government is committed to protecting a woman's right to make her own decisions about her body and about abortion. My government helped make a woman's right to choose a reality. We will fight to ensure that a woman's reproductive rights are safeguarded and never taken away.

Earlier this year, my government gave pharmacists the ability to dispense emergency contraceptives to women throughout BC. Our work to ensure women have better access to emergency contraceptives will be confirmed in amendments to

the *Pharmacists, Pharmacy Operations and Drug Scheduling Act.*

My government will take further action to secure a woman's right to choose. These changes will help ensure abortion services and counselling are available outside of the Lower Mainland and Capital Region. They will protect the safety of patients and service providers. They will assist with the important work of finding safe and less invasive pharmaceutical alternatives to surgical abortions

There are two directions we can go when it comes to health care in British Columbia.

We can find real solutions that get our public health care system back on track or we can let it slide into American-style private care where the quality of the service you receive depends on the money you can spend.

If health care funding is cut to pay for dramatic tax cuts, the result will be less public health care and more American-style private care.

Today's Families Include Everyone In BC

My government believes health care and education are fundamental to the quality of life for today's families.

And we believe there are other basic things government must do to help make life better for us all.

That's why my government is proud to have Ed John, Grand Chief of the Tl'azt'en Nation, serving as BC's Minister for Children and Families.

We have a social responsibility to help the most vulnerable in our society who suffer in circumstances beyond their control.

That is why my government was encouraged to hear the Prime Minister promise new initiatives to fight child poverty. We will take up the Prime Minister's offer and will work with the federal government to help lift children out of poverty.

My government's budget this year will contain significant increases to early childhood programs for children in every BC community. My government will also begin to double the province's school meal program so that all children have equal opportunities to grow, develop, and learn.

My government is already making an $8-million government investment in early childhood health and development so that aboriginal children and their families in 15 urban centres will benefit from

a community-based network of services to promote child, family and community wellness.

To help further this work, my government has established a working group of cabinet ministers to initiate a comprehensive response to the issues facing aboriginal people, both on and off of reserves. We are committed to better integration and coordination of social and other services and to a larger role for aboriginal communities in the delivery of these services.

In this session, my government will increase funding available to First Nations to document and preserve the languages of BC's first people. We will strengthen legislation to help ensure these languages are known for generations to come.

My government's 2001 budget will also increase funding for the families and communities who, through their own schools and programs, are teaching their children Mandarin, Punjabi, German and other heritage languages.

Homelessness continues to be a serious problem in parts of British Columbia and across Canada. My government will continue to be one of only two provincial governments with a comprehensive program to fund and support the construction of new social housing. Our most recent steps to

address the serious problem of homelessness include plans to create up to 275 housing units in the Woodward's Building in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver.

All British Columbians deserve our support and respect. My government will expand the financial support available for British Columbians with disabilities. New amendments to adult guardianship laws will allow notaries public to advise on representation agreements and give British Columbians greater confidence that their financial and health care intentions will be followed should they ever become incapacitated.

Helping Families Make Ends Meet

My government will not walk away from its social responsibility to help all British Columbians share in the high quality of life of this bountiful province.

That's why my government introduced the BC family bonus to help low income working families and reduce child poverty.

That's why one of the Premier's first official acts was to launch our new before and after school child care program which, as of January 1st this year, is helping 20,000 more BC families ensure their children get proper care while parents work to make ends meet.

These are significant steps; but they are only a beginning.

In this session, my government will take further steps to implement our four-year universal child care plan. Our plan will make licensed child care available throughout British Columbia at a saving to families of up to $1100 per child.

My government will do even more to help British Columbians strike a better balance between their work and family lives.

In 1995, the majority of members in this Assembly voted to create the first legislated family leave in BC's history. This session, my government will take action to improve BC's minimum wage and to ensure working people have more opportunities to care for their families.

Women in BC still earn only 73% of what men earn. My government believes all workers are entitled to equal pay for work of equal value.

This session, my government will introduce amendments to the Human Rights Code to enshrine the fundamental right of equal pay for work of equal value.

Pay equity will mean thousands of BC women are better able to support themselves and their families

and that BC is closer to ending systemic wage discrimination based on gender.

Expanding Education and Opportunities For All British Columbians

British Columbians know that education is the key to our sons and daughters getting ahead and making a good life for themselves.

They know education is the best economic investment a government can make.

That's why my government wants British Columbia to become the education province — and we take this goal very seriously.

BC's education record a decade ago was not the source of pride it is today. The percentage of British Columbians getting a post-secondary education was second worst in the country. Today it is the second best.

Schools were crowded and portables flourished in place of the new schools growing communities needed.

My government has frozen college and university tuition fees for the last six years. Tuitions are now the second lowest in the country — almost half of what they are in Alberta and Ontario.

My government opened three new public universities — the only new universities in Canada in 25 years.

We have created 40,000 new post-secondary spaces throughout BC, 2000 of them in technology.

And BC's universities are consistently recognized as being among the best in the country.

In BC, we're building a new school every 19 days and eliminating portables.

In 1998, my government reduced class sizes in the early grades and this year we have recommitted ourselves to a maximum of 20 students in kindergarten and 22 in grades 1 to 3, so that children get more individual learning attention and a strong start in school.

We've connected every public school and campus to the Internet — the first province to do so.

We've increased student testing and reporting back to parents.

This is a record all British Columbians can take pride in. But we still need to look ahead.

BC is already experiencing a skill shortage in some areas and sixty per cent of new jobs in the next decade will be in trades and technical occupations.

This represents a tremendous opportunity for BC's young people — but only if the government invests in the training they'll need for the jobs of tomorrow.

My government is determined that BC will meet the need for skilled people. We will build on BC's competitive advantage and ensure all British Columbians have an opportunity to get the education and training they need to succeed and prosper.

Out of the new revenues we received this year, my government has committed $46 million to ensure university, college and institute library, lab and research facilities keep pace with increasing enrolment and technological change.

My government is cutting tuition fees by 5% at all public post-secondary institutions.

And we will add 5,000 new spaces to our universities, colleges and institutes next year.

My government will fully fund this tuition cut and these new spaces and put our commitment in law through a new *Access To Education Act* to be introduced this session. That way, our colleges, universities and institutes can maintain the excellence of our advanced education system.

My government will double the number of spaces for apprenticeship, skilled trades and technology training, to 50,000 per year over the next four years.

Safer Communities and A Higher Quality Of Life

My government and other provincial governments have urged Ottawa to enhance the safety of Canadian families and communities through a national sex offender registry. In the absence of federal action, my government will take action.

We will introduce legislation requiring convicted sex offenders to register with law enforcement agencies and allowing government to compile and disseminate more information on sex offenders to police and community notification agencies.

My government is working with Ottawa to establish a drug court pilot program in Vancouver. This will give drug-dependent offenders the option to combine judicial supervision with treatment and other services. It will reduce the strain on the criminal justice and health systems by helping people overcome their addictions.

My government's film classification office has reviewed violent video games in order to help

BC families make informed choices about video games. My government will continue to respond to the concerns of parents by creating and enforcing a classification system for videos and games and regulating sales and rentals to young people.

British Columbians were shocked by the consequences of failing to protect drinking water tragically experienced by the residents of Walkerton, Ontario. My government will introduce a *Drinking Water Protection Act* to ensure BC does not place this most precious resource at risk and repeat the tragic mistakes of other jurisdictions.

This statute follows province-wide consultation on new drinking water standards and regulation. The law will control surface water and groundwater where necessary, and will provide strong powers to drinking water officers.

British Columbia is an acknowledged leader on environmental issues. We will continue to improve on that record. In this session, my government will introduce legislation establishing a commissioner for environment and sustainability who will work in the Office of the Auditor General and report to the legislature.

My government will introduce legislation requiring the labelling of foods sold in British Columbia that

contain genetically-engineered organisms. Consumers have a fundamental right to know what is in their food. And by acting now, as this requirement becomes law in Europe and elsewhere, we will protect our access to export markets.

In the last session, my government introduced an exposure bill designed to protect citizens against lawsuits that limit their legitimate participation in public debates. We have consulted with British Columbians and amended our proposal in response to their input. We will re-introduce a new *Protection of Public Participation Act* in this session.

A Modern Economy That Works For Everyone

With our internationally envied quality of life and the investments we have made to further strengthen our economic advantages, BC is positioned as a key player in North American and international markets.

We have a magnificent natural heritage and a healthy, well educated and productive work force.

We have some of Canada's top universities, colleges and technical institutes. My government has opened new universities. We have opened doors for 40,000 more students. And we're cutting the cost of getting a quality education.

We are advanced in the area of research and technology, which my government has assisted with R&D grants and tax credits, and a massive investment in health and biotechnology research.

We have talented people and innovative companies to whom my government offers favourable tax treatment of share options, a declining marginal tax rate, and the best schools, hospitals and communities to be found on the continent.

Our modern transportation and economic infrastructure is the result of significant public investments made by my government while bringing public finances into balance and keeping per capita public debt the second lowest in Canada.

Labour relations under my government's balanced and progressive laws are more peaceful than at virtually any time in BC's history.

We have an abundant supply of publicly-owned electrical power. And my government is committed to helping BC's regions get an economic advantage from their resources through programs like Fair Share, the Columbia Basin Trust and Forest Renewal.

My government is helping to create a growing number of community forests, enacted world-class

forestry standards, and helped local communities make land use plans for over four-fifths of BC's land base.

BC has shown we have people of vision and tenacity. The people who hammered out those plans not only preserved a land base for their economic future, they helped BC become the first jurisdiction in North America to meet the United Nations goal of preserving 12 per cent of its land in parks and protected areas.

A Modern Economy That Looks to the Future

BC families face a choice between dramatic tax cuts and more health care and better education.

They also face a choice between building a modern economy with a high quality of life for today's families, high environmental standards and a commitment to a just society or tying our economic hopes to dramatic tax cuts, lower standards and the likelihood of even greater confrontation in our communities.

My government will not sacrifice the health care and education British Columbians rely on. Health care and education come first.

My government will continue with land use planning until all BC communities have had a

chance to secure a land base for their economic development and to create new parks and protected areas.

We will work to secure BC's international forest markets and get more BC products certified by strengthening the Forest Practices Code and environmental standards. My government will not risk these markets or risk a return to a war in the woods by gutting the Code or cutting standards.

My government will continue to reduce costs in the forest sector and seek a public consensus on a working forest law. But we will not promise annual harvest levels that cannot be sustained. We will not ask forest workers to feed their families on false hope.

We will protect our public electrical utility and protect the environment by doubling BC Hydro's use of renewable sources of energy. My government will never privatize even a portion of BC Hydro or deregulate electricity. The disastrous results of privatizing and deregulating BC's natural gas are evidence enough of the danger of such a policy.

My government will continue to negotiate in good faith to settle the claims of BC's First Nations. We will work to reach new Agreements in Principle and negotiate Final Agreements.

Settling this critical question is a matter of justice.

It is a matter of ending economic uncertainty that is costing BC a billion dollars in lost investment and jobs.

It is a matter of eliminating the rule of the paternalistic and costly Indian Act in BC and ensuring aboriginal communities have the means to achieve greater economic opportunity and self-reliance.

We must not retreat from doing the right thing.

My government will not settle this matter by seeking to overturn treaties in the courts. BC needs certainty, not the conflict and confrontation that results from uncertainty.

My government will continue to negotiate in an open forum on the basis of principles we published many years ago and the principles that have been established in public negotiations. We will not set the process back a decade in order to satisfy political imperatives.

Two years ago the Nisga'a treaty was a proud moment for BC, and British Columbians have many such moments to come.

My government pledges itself to justice for First Nations and economic certainty for all British Columbians.

I have every confidence, Honourable members, that you will rise to the challenges I have placed before the Assembly.

I offer my best wishes to each of you as you discharge your duties and responsibilities in this legislative session.